

# THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

SINCE 1878

INLAND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S NEWSPAPER

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## Inland homeless to be counted

**CAMPS:** Upcoming censuses are meant to improve county services for the indigent.

BY JOHN ASBURY  
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Johnny Molina has some of the basics of a home, like a recliner, a portable TV and blankets, but he lacks the most important of all — a home.

The 53-year-old lives under a tree on a barren stretch of land between Interstate 215 and Old Hwy. 215 near Moreno Valley. Other homeless people also inhabit the area, which is sparsely populated with a handful of businesses, including a charity thrift store and an adult bookstore.

"It's hard to live comfortable this way," Molina said in August. "You pray to get the hell out of here someday. You can only do it for so long."

Five months later, Molina still lives under the shade of a tree, as he has for five years.

He is one of 4,785 homeless identified in a 2004-05 Riverside County census. On Wednesday, the county will conduct another one-day census of its homeless.

The nonprofit Community Action partnership in San Bernardino County is planning a similar census for that county during the last week of February, said Rowena Concepcion, assistant to the agency's director. It is seeking funding for the \$80,000 to \$100,000 census, she said.

San Bernardino County's most recent data, from 2002, shows it has between 5,270 and 8,351 homeless. Concepcion said, with the lower end of the range being more usual.

The department of Housing and Urban Development requires counties to complete the biannual census to determine what public service programs are needed to support the homeless population. Riverside County pays for the \$80,000 census from its general fund, said homeless programs supervisor Rick Pettet.

With results from the census, Riverside County officials will work with community leaders to develop strategies and resources to combat homelessness. Officials will also draft a proposal to present to the Board of Supervisors later this year, Pettet said.

Plans include starting a homeless trust fund for communities to distribute resources and create housing goals, Pettet said.

"The homeless never magically disappear; we just shift people around," said Ron Stewart, director of Riverside County's homeless programs. "Until there's an adequate social response, we keep shoveling them along."



CAITLIN M. KELLY/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Katrina Peres, 27, has been homeless for about two years. She lives with her cat, Figalo, and her boyfriend, Raymond Wilcox, 53, off Old Hwy. 215 in the Moreno Valley area. Some nearby business owners have complained about homeless people littering and leaving behind beer bottles and human waste.

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Johnny Molina, shown here in August at his camp, lives on a barren piece of land between Interstate 215 and Old Hwy. 215 in the Moreno Valley area. Molina is among more than 4,700 homeless people identified in a 2004-05 Riverside County census.

## HOMELESS POPULATION

Riverside and San Bernardino counties conduct mandated homeless studies.

Riverside County's 2004-05 results:

- Homeless population: 4,785.
- About 33 percent are women.
- About 25 percent are under the age of 25.
- More than 25 percent of homeless men are veterans.
- More than 33 percent of homeless report mental and mood disorders and about half admit to using drugs and alcohol.

San Bernardino County's 2002-03 results:

- Homeless population: Between 5,270 and 8,351.
- More than one-third are women.
- About 14 percent are under the age of 18.
- About 15 percent are veterans.
- About 12 percent suffer from mental or mood disorders and about one-third use drugs and alcohol.

SOURCE: RIVERSIDE COUNTY HOMELESS SERVICES AND THE SAN BERNARDINO COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

## OUT OF SIGHT

The homeless inhabit areas in both counties, including the Santa Ana River bed near the Riverside and San Bernardino county lines, along Interstate 10 eastward into the desert and beneath overpasses.

Some claim they became homeless because of unfortunate employment circumstances. Others admit they fell prey to drugs and alcohol.

In Moreno Valley, the stretch

between Cactus Avenue and Alessandro Boulevard along Old Highway 215 where Molina lives is home to about a dozen people.

The area is dotted with tents and discarded furniture and littered with bottles, wrappers and cardboard. Away from most homes and businesses, camp residents avoid hassles with city and county agencies, but still gain the attention and benefits of local charity groups.

Near Interstate 10, where low power lines hang for miles along the tracks near Cathedral City, cardboard boxes are used

by the homeless for shelter.

In Indio, Mara Mendez, 23, removed a storm drain cover and lives in the three-foot tall crevasse beneath a portion of Interstate 10 that crosses the Whitewater River bed. She arrived there from Los Angeles six years ago after, she said, simply giving up her job and losing her apartment.

She is leery of living in a shelter.

"Maybe if I had a place, with not so many rules, I would start looking for a job," Mendez said.

Riverside County spokesman Ray Smith called homelessness a social issue, but said the county will continue to address it.

"We'll continue to offer any assistance as needed, but we can't force anyone into our services," Smith said.

Molina, who gains money from collecting cans and paunching on the 215 freeway overpass, said he became homeless when he was fired after a domestic violence charge. He said he came to the desolate

field by Old 215 after police shooed him away from a camp on Cottonwood Avenue in Moreno Valley.

Business owners near the homeless camp on Old 215 said the homeless have littered their property, leaving beer bottles and human waste.

Marge Hood, owner of the nearby Big O Tires, said she has had to use pressure washers to clean human waste off the grounds around her store. Lately, she said, she hasn't noticed as many problems.

Many cities, like Moreno Valley and Riverside, adopted no-camping ordinances that prevent homeless from living on city streets and private property.

Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, based in Washington, D.C., said communities are not doing enough to reduce the number of homeless.

"Downtown America has been beautified to push the homeless to areas where services are not provided," Stoops said.

"The key for them is to be as invisible as possible ... It's important for the community to know these strangers are not all dangerous; they're just people living outside."

## LOST PRIDE

Dave Winsemius, another homeless man who lived near Old 215, admitted that drugs and alcohol led to his homelessness.

In August, the homeless Vietnam veteran recalled the last eight years: sleeping on sidewalks and in front of businesses and stints in jail for public intoxication, burglary and trespassing.

"I'm pretty filthy. I need to get cleaned up. My life's a mess right now," Winsemius said. "I have to be honest with myself: Maybe I just gave up."

In December, Winsemius died at the Loma Linda Veterans Medical Center, hospital spokeswoman Kristen Hall said.

To remember him, the homeless at the Old 215 painted Winsemius' name on a wooden sign and propped it at the foot of a tree along with an empty beer bottle.

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